

FARM FACTS

Wildcrafting

Produced by Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Wildcrafting is the gathering of plant material in its natural habitat. Products harvested may range from bark, twigs, moss, and lichen which are used in the floral and craft industries, to wild berries and mushrooms and medicinal plants which are used as food and health products. The interest in wildcrafting has grown over the last few years as companies seek natural ingredients in their products.

Although many gatherers are looking to make some supplemental income from harvesting various products from the forest, one of the main reasons for participating in this industry is the opportunity to get out and enjoy nature. Wildcrafting does not require a large capital investment to get started. Knowledge of the outdoors, a means of transportation and hard work are the most important factors for success.

A common myth about wildcrafting is that there is lots of money to be made harvesting products from the wild. Occasionally when prices are

good and there is an abundant crop, good profits can be made. However, the norm is that long hours and strenuous work are often required to make sufficient returns. A lot of time must be spent scouting areas for product. People who are trying to make a living in this industry have to concentrate on products which will bring the highest return. Therefore, harvesters will switch between several different products depending on the markets, availability of product and demand.

Plant Identification

Before anyone goes out to harvest plant materials, you must be able to positively identify the product. There are many poisonous plants and mushrooms that can make consumers very sick or even cause death. There are very good plant field guides that can be used to aid identification. A good guide for the forest region is *Plants of the Western Boreal Forest and Aspen Parkland* published by Lone Pine and written by Johnson/Kershaw/MacKinnon/Pojar.

For the prairies, *Wildflowers Across the Prairies* published by Douglas and McIntyre and written by Vance/Jowsey/McLean is very useful. Learning from someone that is knowledgeable about plants is also a very good method.

Sustainable Harvests

The increased demand for natural products has heightened concern about the environmental effects of harvesting wild plants. It is important that wildcrafters selectively harvest plant material, especially roots, to ensure that they do not destroy plant populations. It is in the best interests of wildcrafters to harvest in a responsible manner so that there will be something to harvest in the future. This is often referred to as ethical harvesting.

Rare, threatened, or endangered species should not be harvested. Lists of these plants can be obtained from the Saskatchewan Conservation Data Centre or your local Saskatchewan Environment & Resource Management office.



Fireweed is best cut while in early bloom.

There are many different suggestions as to how much plant material can be safely harvested without causing irreparable damage to the population. This will vary greatly depending upon the species, site and various conditions. Each plant and ecosystem is unique in the amount and kind of harvesting it can handle.

Some general recommendations can be made. You should gather only from abundant stands. If you are harvesting the roots of plants, the oldest and largest plants should be dug up. These plants are usually found in the center of a patch. Various practices can also be carried out to help the spread of the plants. Leaving the crown (part of the plant just above and below ground) of some rootstocks or harvesting only a portion of the rhizomes (underground stems) will assist plant regeneration.

Many buyers will only purchase product that has been ethically wildcrafted. Companies selling ethically wildcrafted products have an advantage in the marketplace. Many also obtain organic certification for product

harvested from the wild to increase their marketing advantage. In order to obtain organic certification, certifying bodies must inspect areas to determine that the sites are being harvested in a sustainable manner and are free from pesticides and pollution.

TIME OF HARVEST

The time of harvest is dependent on the plant part required and the needs of the buyer. Root crops such as wild licorice (*Glycyrrhiza lepidota*), wild sarsaparilla (*Aralia nudicalulus*) and rat root (*Acorus calamus*) are harvested

when the plant is dormant. This can be in the spring before new growth begins or in the fall when the plant is going into dormancy. The highest concentration of phytochemicals is usually found in the root at this time.

Herbaceous plants such as stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) and fireweed (*Epilobium angustifolium*) are best cut just prior to flowering or in early bloom. Flower blossoms of plants like red clover (*Trifolium pratense*) should be harvested in mid-morning after the dew has dried.

The bark of trees and shrubs such as birch, aspen and willow are best harvested in the spring when the sap is running. The bark can be easily stripped off at this time.

The seeds of wild plants should be collected when they are mature but before they drop off. The time period that you have varies with the plant species.



Sandy Ross of Weyakwin collecting flat birch bark.

Photo courtesy of Cliff Jessup



Green moss (*Pleurozium schreberi*) is harvested from forest areas prior to timber harvesting.

Regulations

Saskatchewan Environment & Resource Management (SERM) regulates activities on Crown land. Guidelines concerning harvesting, permitting and allocation of non-timber forest products (special forest products) have been developed. A permitting system has been established to substantiate the extent of the industry, minimize or avert potential conflict between those associated in the industry and assess the future regulatory effort that may be required.

Permits are issued to commercial dealers/buyers only. A buyer/dealer is an individual or company purchasing non-timber forest products for resale; or harvesters that sell directly out of province. ***Commercial harvesters do not require their own permit.*** Purchase of products from commercial harvesters will be documented by the buyers/dealers on Special Forest

Product Ledgers. The ledgers will be supplied at the time of permit acquisition.

A Forest Product Permit will be used to authorize dealers/buyers to purchase and/or harvest non-timber forest products. The permit should state total anticipated volume of product(s) to be acquired through harvesting and/or purchases. ***Permits are not required for own use/non-commercial use of non-timber forest products or any berry picking, including commercial purposes.*** Permits can be issued by SERM area offices.

For more information on permits and permit conditions, contact SERM, Forest Ecosystems Branch in Prince Albert or your SERM area office.

Wildcrafting on private lands is not as restrictive. However, landowners or lessees should be consulted to obtain their approval.

Processing Requirements

The proper handling, drying and storage of plant material is critical to the success of any wildcrafting operation. Facilities must be adequate to handle the volumes that are harvested. Premium prices will be paid for a quality product that has been picked at the proper time, cleaned and dried if required, and stored properly.

Markets

Before wildcrafters harvest any plant material, they should ensure that they have a market for the product they plan to harvest. They should also be aware of the requirements of the buyer to avoid any disputes at the time of sale. Buyers usually have specifications that must be met if you are to make the sale. Product must also be harvested at the correct time to ensure quality. There may be specific times of the year that a product can be harvested. If a local buying depot is not available, you must be sure to include transportation costs to determine the viability of harvesting plant material.

If product is being exported out of the country, you should ensure that export requirements are met. This may include such things as fumigation of product, proper labeling and packaging.

List of contacts

Saskatchewan Agriculture & Food

Gerry Ivanochko, Sustainable
Production Branch,
Box 5000, La Ronge, SK S0J
1L0
(306)425-4400 or toll-free in
Sask. 1-800-665-4400
website: <http://www.agr.gov.sk.ca/>
e-mail: givanochko@agr.gov.sk.ca

Saskatchewan Conservation Data Centre

Shelia Lamont, Botanist
324 - 3211 Albert St., Regina,
SK S4S 5W6
(306)787-7198
website: www.biodiversity.sk.ca/
e-mail:
sheila.lamont.erm@govmail.gov.sk.ca

Saskatchewan Environment & Resource Management

Del Phillips, Forest Ecosys-
tems Branch,
Box 3003, Prince Albert, SK
S6V 6G1
(306)953-2876
website: www.serm.gov.sk.ca/
e-mail:
Del.Phillips.erm@govmail.gov.sk.ca

